

# Blameworthiness and Privileged Moral Failure

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Concepción", written in a cursive style.

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that epistemically damaged privileged individuals are usually not blameworthy for the harm they cause to non-privileged individuals as a result of that privilege. Insofar as a person is privileged, s/he is likely epistemically damaged in the sense that s/he has internalized a social form of biased perception that does not allow her/him to realize that s/he is causing harm. I believe individuals are not blameworthy for their privileged acts when they fail to satisfy the epistemic condition for blameworthiness. Recognizing that typically the right place to focus energies is on restoring the harmed party, I will claim that because a function of oppressive systems is to maintain privilege-protecting ignorance, most privileged individuals do not meet the epistemic control condition and are therefore not blameworthy.

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## Blameworthiness and Privileged Moral Failure

People of privilege often unknowingly act in harmful ways toward those individuals who lack the same privilege. Sometimes, I do or say things that are harmful, and because of the fact I am privileged, I do not even realize they are harmful. In one particular incident, I made an unreflective classist comment to a person I love dearly. This person grew up in very different circumstances from my own and experienced my comment as harmful. Although I immediately realized the implications of my words and apologized, I felt terrible for the implicit bias that had evidently prompted that comment. My friend knew I meant no harm and easily forgave me; however, the incident remains important to me to this day. Following this incident, I began to feel extremely guilty and wondered whether my guilty conscience was justified. If so, was I blameworthy for my actions and attitudes, many of which I never realized I had before that moment?

I am particularly interested in cases where privileged individuals do not realize they are acting in harmful ways. I used to think that most, if not all, privileged individuals are blameworthy for all of their actions and attitudes. After I realized the implications of my comment, I personally wanted to be held accountable for my poor behavior and was extremely reluctant to let myself and others off the hook too easily. I felt that privileged people, including myself, needed to be held responsible when they cause harm. However, upon reflection, I have come to believe that most privileged people are blameless for most of the harms they cause because most of the time their privilege does not allow them to know that their actions are wrong. However, though harm-doers from privilege are not blameworthy, it is frequently justifiable to hold them accountable for their actions. Although I originally thought it offensive

to conclude that most harmful acts from privilege are blameless, I now think such a view has merit. It is possible to condemn the harms done without always blaming the harm-doer.

In this paper, I will argue that epistemically damaged privileged individuals are usually not blameworthy for the harm they cause. Insofar as a person is privileged, s/he is likely epistemically damaged relative to the type of privilege at issue. S/he is damaged in the sense that s/he has internalized a social form of biased perception that does not allow her/him to realize that s/he is causing harm, and as such s/he cannot, even though s/he wishes to, avoid acting wrongly. S/he is morally-cum-epistemically disabled. I believe individuals are not blameworthy for their privilege when they fail to satisfy the epistemic condition for blameworthiness. Indeed, individuals are only blameworthy for their privilege when they fail to remove knowledge limiting veils of perception after a sufficient number of glimpses of the truth that should cause one to realize that one has on a perception biasing veil. Critics might claim that individuals should have had knowledge about their privileged acts and are therefore blameworthy for their harmful privileged acts. However, without condoning the harmful action, and recognizing that typically the right place to focus energies is on restoring the harmed party, I will claim that because a function of oppressive systems is to maintain privilege-protecting ignorance, most privileged individuals do not meet the epistemic control condition and are therefore not blameworthy.

The paper will proceed in four sections. First, I will discuss the control conditions for blameworthiness and establish the need for an epistemic control condition. I will then examine the concepts of privilege and oppressive systems and claim that privileged individuals often do not meet the epistemic control condition for blameworthiness. Third, I will argue that even though privileged people are blameless, they still should be admonished, punished, and blamed



at times. Finally, I will discuss how the privileged should respond to the claim that they are not blameworthy.

### **Privileged Behaviors and the Epistemic Condition**

Many privileged people are surprised or even indignant when blame is directed toward them for harms they produce only because they are morally disabled. Often, privileged individuals interact with non-privileged people in ways that the privileged individuals find completely innocent, in the sense that they do not see themselves as causing harm. Such interactions occur without either knowledge of the harmfulness of the action or intent to cause harm. Therefore, when privileged people are accused of acting in harmful ways, many accurately, if problematically, deny that they had knowledge about the harm of their actions. Others seem unable to fathom how their apparently “innocent” behaviors could have been so greatly misunderstood as harmful when they were not intended to be. In fact, it is the privileged who misunderstand the situation, not the non-privileged. While some seek to end any harms that might be associated with their actions, others attribute the problem to the non-privileged people and claim that their innocent action was “taken the wrong way.” In light of this, it is important to make sense of the blame levied against privileged people who lack knowledge regarding their actions by asking whether privileged individuals actually are worthy of the blame levied against them when they cause harm. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to examine the conditions for blameworthiness.

According to Sher, blameworthiness is composed of two control conditions: one epistemic and the other metaphysical.<sup>1</sup> For an individual to be blameworthy, s/he must have an

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<sup>1</sup> Sher, George. *In Praise of Blame*. (Oxford, 2006). 58.

appropriate level of control over her/his actions. S/he must know the moral valence of a potential action and be able to choose to avoid doing it if it is wrong and choose to do it if it is right. Sher examines the “searchlight view,” or the view that an agent’s responsibility extends only so far as his awareness of what s/he is doing.<sup>2</sup> The epistemic condition requires that individuals have an awareness of the wrongness of their would-be action and still choose the act. Such awareness need not be extended to every detail of the situation; rather, it is sufficient that the individual be aware that the act is wrong and the rough outcomes it might entail.<sup>3</sup> The epistemic and metaphysical control conditions must both apply for the individual to be blameworthy. The metaphysical condition states that individuals must have been able to prevent and choose their actions. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus upon the epistemic condition.

According to the epistemic condition, individuals are blameworthy only if they know that they are acting wrongly towards others. Of particular interest to this discussion is when individuals act in unjust privileged ways. Individuals meet the epistemic condition when, despite an awareness or knowledge of something’s moral sub-optimality, they choose it anyway. In the case of privilege, this would involve knowledge of their privilege and the harmful consequences of their actions. This distinction creates the possibility of blameless harm and suggests that individuals who lack an understanding or awareness of their privilege are blameless even when they act upon it in harmful ways. In contrast, those individuals who are aware of their privilege and intentionally exploit it are blameworthy for the harm they cause as a result because they meet the epistemic requirement for control.

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<sup>2</sup> Sher, *Who Knew?*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Sher, George. *Who Knew? Responsibility without Awareness*. (Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

While it seems clear that individuals who have knowledge of their privilege and act upon it in ways that harm others are blameworthy for that harm, it is less clear that simply failing to realize one's privilege automatically exempts individuals from blameworthiness. Critics may argue that the epistemic control condition is too lenient. In some cases, blameworthiness is transitive, such that ignorant wrongdoers are blameworthy. While lacking knowledge excuses one from blame, critics may claim that at least some privileged individuals should have had this knowledge. Because they should have known, they are culpable for their ignorance, as well as the harms they cause as a result of it. To illustrate this sort of culpable ignorance, Smith describes a camper who fails to put out her/his campfire, which ignites and results in a forest fire.<sup>4</sup> Failing to douse the campfire, according to this scenario, was an unwitting wrong act.<sup>5</sup> Although the camper did not intend to do wrong, s/he can be reasonably expected to know that leaving a fire untended could result in a forest fire. Therefore, her/his failure to douse the fire constitutes a moral failure for which s/he is blameworthy, and because s/he is blameworthy for failing to douse the fire, which is the cause of the forest fire, s/he is also blameworthy for the forest fire. If there exists some analogous knowledge which a privileged agent should have known when acting, yet failed to know through some personal failure, the epistemic condition might remain satisfied and render the agent blameworthy for her/his acts that occurred as a result of her/his failure to acquire the appropriate knowledge.

At first glance, it does seem that such knowledge readily exists. Many privileged individuals live within societies in which ample opportunity to realize their privilege has been provided from multiple sources. The civil rights movement, for instance, provided an abundant

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Holly. "Culpable Ignorance." *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (Oct., 1983), 545.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 566.

amount of information regarding racial privilege and social injustice. Further, we live in a world in which social media and globalization have facilitated the rapid spread of information, ideas, and ease of interactions with individuals who differ in their levels of privilege, such that failing to recognize one's own privileged ways of acting toward others in the midst of such widespread exposure could be considered a failure on the part of the privileged individual. In the midst of such widespread evidence, it might seem that failing to recognize privilege and acting in subsequently harmful privileged ways constitutes a benighting act for which the agent is blameworthy. Because the agent was provided sufficient opportunity to understand her/his privileged status and change her/his behavior, s/he is blameworthy for the harms caused as a result of not doing so.

For the individual to be culpably ignorant, however, s/he should have known about the harmful nature of her/his acts. While critics are correct that an abundant amount of information exists regarding the nature of privilege, the obligation to know something suggests that there is some act the agent is culpable for not doing which resulted in that lack of knowledge. If the agent did not know that there existed an obligation to pursue the knowledge of her/his own privilege and its resulting harms, the fact that s/he did not know to pursue it (and thus possess it) cannot be held against her/him.

However, it is important to examine a critique of culpable ignorance before examining the blameworthiness or blamelessness of privileged individuals. Sher claims that culpable ignorance, the appeal to the idea that the individual should have known, fails to account for blameworthiness when such failures to know are not the result of conscious choices.<sup>6</sup> For instance, suppose that a privileged person failed to realize her/his own privilege, but s/he did not

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<sup>6</sup> Sher, *Who Knew?* 83.

consciously choose some act that resulted in her/his failure to realize. The person may not have chosen the act qua its relation to her/his knowledge; rather, the act may have been done qua convenience, etc. For instance, assume an individual fails to attend a diversity class because s/he felt like taking a nap. The person did not fail to attend the class with the intention of later failing to realize, but s/he did so with the understanding that s/he would miss the course content. In this case, though the person's intentions were less wrong, the act may still be blameworthy. In contrast, assume the same person simply forgot to attend the class. In this case, the question of how someone can be responsible for something of which s/he was unaware reappears as a question about her/his failure to realize his privilege. Culpable ignorance in the second case merely reframes the question as a question about the individual's failure to pay attention.<sup>7</sup> That is, how can someone be blameworthy for a failure of which s/he was unaware? If the individual had no awareness or consciousness that resulted in her/his subsequent lack of awareness, culpable ignorance is unsuccessful. Further, even if the individual did choose some act that resulted in her/his not realizing her/his own privilege, this does not reflect upon many other privileged individuals, most of whom do not consciously decide to not pay attention to the wrong features of their privileged acts.

As an alternative to retaining the epistemic control condition, critics might conclude that collective blameworthiness trickles down to individual blameworthiness. Consider Oshana, who believes that individuals are blameworthy as a result of their unreflective association with and membership in blameworthy collectives. She states, "A person is blameworthy when the person deliberately or out of indifference or unwarranted ignorance refuses to acknowledge, confront,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

and take steps to expunge the legacy of ill will he has inherited.”<sup>8</sup> This suggests that a person can be morally tainted due to personal or sociopolitical association with a morally responsible individual or group. According to this formulation, a white person is blameworthy for her/his membership in the collective of white people who benefit from white privilege. The morally tainted individual, according to Oshana, is blameworthy insofar as s/he fails disassociate her/himself from that group.<sup>9</sup> Such failure amounts to a lack of “authenticity with respect to one’s self-conception.”<sup>10</sup>

However, it is unclear that collective blameworthiness can exist as a function of the individual and support the notion of individual blameworthiness for the unjust privileged harm of the entire group. This problem is further reinforced by Gilbert, who directly claims that it is possible for an individual to say of her/his group, “We did wrong,” without necessarily taking direct responsibility for the action.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Sinnott-Armstrong examines the issue of the individual response to climate change and claims, “individual moral obligations do not always follow directly from collective moral obligations.”<sup>12</sup> Because there is no way to connect the individual to the harm of the entire collective, individuals are not blameworthy for the collective harm of climate change.

Similarly, while individual racists may contribute to the collective harm of racism, they are not blameworthy for the entire harm of racism on a systematic level because their

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<sup>8</sup> Oshana, Marina. “Moral Taint.” *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 37, Nos. 3-4, July 2006, 372-3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 368.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gilbert, Margaret. “Who’s to Blame? Collective Responsibility and its Implications for Group Members.” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXX (2006), 112.

<sup>12</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter, “It’s Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations, in Stephen M. Gardiner, Simon Caney, Dale Jameson, and Henry Shue, *Climate Ethics: essential readings* (Oxford, 2010): 333.

contributions by themselves do not constitute the systematic harm which is the problem of privilege. A “racist” act is a particular type of harm that would not exist as a racist harm without the existence of the collective. Rather, the act would exist as an isolated harm. Further, Sinnott-Armstrong claims that when harms are done by many in a collective, “we should distribute blame...so as to give incentives for the worst offenders to get better” because people who are doing worse than normal will suspect that their improvements will still be subject to condemnation regardless of how much they improve.<sup>13</sup>

Gilbert also examines the issue of individual responsibility within collective harm and claims that collectives constitute a “plural subject” that does not trickle down to the individual. Although the agent is contained within the “we,” there exists nothing about the individual in particular by virtue of which s/he could be considered blameworthy for the harms of the entire group. Similarly, Narveson claims that the notion of collective responsibility requires irreducibility.<sup>14</sup> Because the collective as a whole is to blame, no particular individual can be singled out for their particular contributions. Clearly, there is reason to believe that individuals cannot be worthy of blame as a result of their membership in collectives, even when those collectives are blameworthy for harm. I believe Gilbert, Sinnott-Armstrong, and Narveson are correct to claim that the collective cannot successfully distribute responsibility to the individual, such that there exists something about the individual for which s/he is worthy of blame. If true, this claim denies the possibility that individuals can be blameworthy for the collective harm of privilege. Therefore, collective responsibility does not provide a sufficient alternative to the epistemic control condition.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>14</sup> Narveson, Jan. “Collective Responsibility.” *The Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2002), 183.

Sher attempts to resolve the issue by suggesting an alternative to the searchlight view, which states that an agent is only responsible for that which s/he is aware. According to Sher, individuals are blameworthy for bad acts when they either 1) meet the epistemic requirement or 2) when they fail to meet the epistemic requirement, despite having evidence for its wrongness which a) falls below a particular standard and b) is caused by the interaction of the individual's "constitutive attitudes, dispositions, and traits."<sup>15</sup> According to Sher's alternative view, the epistemic condition is counted as satisfied when the individual's failure to realize her/his wrong act directly connects back to some fact about the individual, such as a flawed character or other combination of dispositions. For instance, if some person has the trait of being self-absorbed, s/he may lack awareness of her/his harmful behavior. This lack of awareness is a function of a problematic fact about the individual. Therefore, s/he is blameworthy for her/his actions.<sup>16</sup>

Sher's alternative to the searchlight view suggests that privileged individuals are blameworthy for the harm caused by privilege not simply because they should have known about their privilege but did not (as in culpable ignorance), but because the explanation of why they did not is the privilege that is a relevant part of who they are as individuals. If a person acts in a racist way without knowing that his act is racist, s/he is nevertheless blameworthy for his racist act because he is a racist. Blameworthiness, in this case, connects directly back to the individual's racist character and the fact that s/he would act in a racist way under certain conditions, rather than her/his awareness about the wrongness of racist acts. The searchlight view typically follows from considering the epistemic condition alone. However, although Sher accepts the epistemic condition in cases where individuals have awareness at any point regarding the wrongness of their bad acts, he ultimately does not require it when 1) the individual lacks

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 90.



awareness and 2) the wrong act connects back to some fact about the individual. In such cases, he asserts that the epistemic condition is not required for the individual to be blameworthy for her/his wrong act.

Sher's conception of blameworthiness for wrong acts that connect back to some fact about the individual follows from his belief that individuals should be blamed for both bad acts and bad traits.<sup>17</sup> He defines bad traits as lacking the appropriate reason-responsiveness to moral considerations. Although individuals typically lack control over the development of their traits, particularly at the moment of action, Sher claims that bad traits connect directly back to the individual. When an individual performs bad acts over which s/he lacks control, the wrongness of the act cannot be attributed to a fact about the individual, and therefore, its wrongness does not reflect badly upon her/him.<sup>18</sup> Bad acts over which individuals lack control "cannot be attributed to [their] failure to respond to the relevant moral reason."<sup>19</sup> In contrast, having a bad trait is to be fundamentally unresponsive to moral reasons. The condition for blame is met because the individual would act badly under certain conditions, which reflects badly upon the individual. Because such traits reflect badly upon agents as individuals, they should be blamed for bad traits even when they lack immediate control over their trait's development.

Placing blameworthiness within the individual's character, therefore, requires a denial of the control condition for blameworthiness, which suggests that individuals can be blameworthy for actions and events over which they lack control. To maintain the existence of blameworthiness for certain harmful acts, Sher's solution essentially denies the control condition in situations where the epistemic condition is not met, but the lack of knowledge is caused by

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 93-114.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

some fact about the person's character. Sher acknowledges that individuals are typically not in full control over the development of their characters. However, lacking control over character is irrelevant, according to Sher, because bad traits reflect badly upon the individual in a way that lacking control over bad acts does not.<sup>20</sup>

However, Sher's alternative requires a problematic notion of blameworthiness. Such an attribution of blameworthiness relies on the concept of transitive blameworthiness, or blaming an individual for an event that is outside of her/his control at a later moment but where the fact of insufficient control at that time is a result of a particular series of events. In other words, on a typical transitive theory of blameworthiness, the individual must meet the epistemic condition at some point prior to the bad act. For example, a racist who acts in a racist manner toward another might not be considered blameworthy because in the moment of action, s/he lacked the awareness that doing so would have harmful consequences. Proponents of transitive blameworthiness might claim that the racist was to blame for not paying attention in a diversity-centered course or for failing to consider key aspects of the situation that might result in her/his action being taken as harmful, among other possible actions. If the individual was aware of the possible wrongness of her/his initial actions that resulted in her/his later lack of awareness, but chose to act anyway, s/he meets the epistemic condition and is blameworthy for the harm caused as a result of her/his actions. In this scenario, it is possible to attribute blameworthiness to the racist by only adding one action to the chain because the individual chose to not pay attention. If, however, the scenario is modified, such that the individual lacked awareness regarding the problematic content of her/his initial actions, s/he fails the epistemic condition at that point in the series of events. Therefore, previous actions must be examined to determine whether the racist

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<sup>20</sup> Sher, George. *In Praise of Blame*. (Oxford, 2006). 58.

ever met the epistemic control condition. Transitive blameworthiness ultimately relies on a “stopping point” at which the individual meets the epistemic condition and is blameworthy for the wrong act.

In the case of the racist, however, there may be cases where a “stopping point” in a chain that meets the epistemic condition does not exist because the racist never had sufficient control over her/his character which resulted in her/his lack of knowledge. To illustrate, suppose the racist grew up in a racist family, such that s/he was taught that certain groups of people are inferior and should be treated as such. In such a case, the chain of actions leading up to her/his racist action could feasibly terminate with the moment of her/his birth, over which s/he surely lacked control. Somewhere down the line as actions are added to the chain, the possibility of a stopping point over which the agent had sufficient control becomes impossible, or the chain becomes so long that transitivity is implausible. Similarly, the control condition disappears when blameworthiness is attached to our characters. Although it is true that the blameworthy racist could have in principle taken actions to change her/his character, such as surrounding her/himself with diverse populations from a young age and reading about privilege, taking these steps would have been extremely difficult without the knowledge that s/he had reason to interrogate her/his beliefs. Individuals who do have such experiences often gain these through circumstantial luck, rather than as the result of a choice to influence their characters.<sup>21</sup> Although it is true that we may have some degree of control over our characters and can sometimes work toward changing our traits over time, the claim that a currently existing “I” could have chosen to form my character differently is a difficult claim to support.

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<sup>21</sup> Nagel, Thomas. “Moral Luck.” *Ethical theory: classical and contemporary readings*. (2002). 294-302.

This formulation of blameworthiness is problematic, however, because it ultimately denies the necessity of the epistemic control condition, which leads to a very particular conception of blameworthiness that directly contradicts many common intuitions about when individuals are blameworthy. According to this conception, the epistemic condition still applies in many cases. However, individuals who fail the epistemic condition are still blameworthy in some cases. Lacking knowledge about an action or the ability to choose otherwise both become unnecessary features of blameworthiness so long as some relevant aspect of our characters can be identified as resulting in a failure of the epistemic condition. Under this theory, individuals either have good or bad characters, and their blameworthiness and praiseworthiness flow from this fact.

I find this conception of blameworthiness very unappealing because it suggests that meeting the relevant control conditions is ultimately unnecessary for any attribution of blameworthiness. Although Sher grants that the epistemic condition still applies in many cases, his ultimate “stopping point” of character relies on a deep sense of self from which praiseworthiness and blameworthiness can flow. Because both views are plausible and internally coherent, I argue that the view which is best is the one that best explains the relevant data. To begin, it is important to consider how we typically assign blame. Particularly in legal rulings, since such rulings are ideally designed to judge fairly (eliminating the problem of unjust blame being directed toward a blameless person), how we deem people blameworthy is of importance to the discussion. Although it is possible that we could be wrong in our rulings, how our practices cohere with theory is significant. For instance, we often lighten or reduce sentences if the individual is proven to lack the relevant mental faculties or understanding regarding their crime, such as in cases of incompetency. Such practices support the consistent application of the

epistemic condition. In contrast, using character as the “stopping point” for blameworthiness would sometimes result in the overturning of these rulings, such that people who had lacked understanding of the wrongness of their crimes might still be considered blameworthy.

However, the critic who allows for character as the stopping point must sometimes allow that the incompetent individual may sometimes be blameworthy.

Further, the stopping point of character requires a strong conception of character from which blameworthiness can flow. However, I do not think that character is this sort of thing. For instance, Lugones suggests a sense of self which is constructed, such that one can travel back and forth between selves.<sup>22</sup> In particular, she claims to have two different selves that are dependent upon her context. Her experience suggests that often, character is not as deeply central as Sher’s conception seems to require. For blameworthiness to flow from such a character would be an odd thing, particularly if the “self” which was blameworthy changed. Although it is possible to claim that a particular self is blameworthy, while another not, I believe this is not typically what we mean to say when we claim that some individual is blameworthy for some event. In contrast, the consistent application of the epistemic condition does not require such a sense of self. Because we can identify ourselves as ourselves through memory, we can maintain the epistemic condition even if the self changes.<sup>23</sup> Because the relevant data seems to support the consistent application of the epistemic condition, I offer an alternative to Sher’s “stopping point” of character as the point at which the individual becomes blameworthy for the harm associated with her/his actions and accept that sometimes, consistently applying the epistemic condition renders individuals blameless when they do wrong.

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<sup>22</sup> Lugones, Maria, “Playfulness, “World”-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” reprinted in Jeffner Allen (ed.) *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures* (SUNY Press, 1990), 159-180.

Because I am unwilling to give up the epistemic control condition, it may seem that I must deny all instances of transitive blameworthiness. Because so many acts can ultimately be traced back to a point at which the individual lacked control, transitive blameworthiness does not successfully satisfy the epistemic control condition. However, I believe this is not the case. Rather than giving up the epistemic condition, I insist upon the consistent application of it in transitive cases. I claim that individuals who fail to have knowledge at some point in the series of events are blameless, while others, where appropriate knowledge is had at some earlier time, may be blameworthy. The question is whether individuals who, because of their privilege, do not have knowledge of the harmfulness of their oppression supporting acts are blameworthy for their harmful acts. My answer is often not, but sometimes so. Again, an agent is blameworthy for her/his action only if s/he meets the control condition directly or transitively. I will begin by discussing the nature of oppressive systems and whether individuals within such systems meet the epistemic condition regarding the harmful implications of their privileged acts.

### **Knowledge within Oppressive Systems**

Oppressive systems often render individuals blameless when the individuals did not and could not reasonably be expected to know about their privilege because few individuals satisfy the control condition in the chain of events that leads to their lack of knowledge. Because the nature of an oppressive system is to maintain the status quo that benefits those on top, one central feature of oppressive systems is that they keep individuals ignorant of the system. Because oppressive systems work to produce a lack of knowledge about privilege and oppression, many

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<sup>23</sup> Lugones, 172.

individuals who maintain systems of unjust privilege do so unknowingly.<sup>24</sup> Oppressive systems reinforce a particular set of norms and values and serve to perpetuate standards that benefit the privileged while undermining the ability to call attention to unjust norms. Because oppressive systems function in this way, many oppressed and privileged individuals alike do not realize they exist within the system.

According to Frye, disassociating from white privilege is “strictly forbidden by the rules of white solidarity and white supremacy, and is not one of the privileges of white power.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, those who do have knowledge about their privilege and attempt to not act upon it are often punished by the system, and their experiences often become invisible to others who might have benefited by becoming aware of their own privilege through the experiences of another. Oppressive barriers benefit the privileged and work best when they are not questioned by either the privileged or the non-privileged. Therefore, those who do become aware of their privilege and speak out are often silenced or marginalized. The privileged who become aware do so often through a series of events that gradually support such awareness. Those who do not often are prevented from doing so by the system in which individuals benefit from lacking knowledge regarding the harm associated with their actions. Oppressive systems reinforce those individuals who do not question oppression and punish those who do. People who draw attention to oppressive frameworks are often disregarded and made invisible within the system. One example of such punishment is the practice of labelling women who speak out about their oppression as hysterical. Because this label relies on a widely accepted stereotype about women,

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<sup>24</sup> Tuana, Nancy, “Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance,” *Hypatia* 19.1 (2004), 194-232.

<sup>25</sup> Frye, Marilyn, “White Woman Feminist” in Christine Koggel (ed.) *Moral Issues in Global Perspective* (Broadview Press, 1999), 233.

it successfully denies their experiences of oppression while simultaneously providing justification for the continuation of the status quo.

In acting in a privileged manner within such systems, the individual fails to fulfill a standard requirement for blame: the epistemic criterion. It is far easier to receive unjust benefits gained as a result of the subjugation of others when one does not realize the nature of those benefits. Because privileged ways of existing in the world are a product of socialization, many people simply do not realize that their ingrained habits and assumptions are actually harmful and perpetuate damaging norms. Many privileged people within oppressive systems are epistemically damaged, such that they often innocently cause lots of harm that they would not have caused if they had known what we could not reasonably expect them to know. Their lack of knowledge serves to prevent them from morally flourishing, from regularly doing right, even as they are not individually blameworthy for their own lack of flourishing.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that although privileged individuals within such systems fail to meet the epistemic criterion and are not blameworthy as such, this does not imply that many of their actions are not harmful, nor should an absence of blameworthiness be understood as condoning the harmful actions. The harmfulness of the privileged actions is often severe, indeed deadly and in the worst cases genocidal. Individuals who cause such harms are in fact obligated to do better. My claim is limited to just this: one can blamelessly harm, and many of the lesser harms committed by privileged individuals are blameless. Certain extreme harms, such as genocide, are blameworthy because anyone should know that genocide is wrong, and transitivity would justify the assertion that certain individuals committing genocide are blameworthy. To illustrate my claim, there exists a moral obligation for all people to not act in racist ways. However, it is consistent to claim that the racist who fails this obligation is



nevertheless blameless when s/he fails to meet the epistemic control condition, directly or transitively.

Privileged individuals within oppressive systems are often prevented from morally flourishing as a result of their failure to meet the epistemic control condition. Individuals who fail this control condition are morally damaged and regularly do wrong even when they would prefer to do the right thing. Because their failure to meet the epistemic control condition prevents them from having knowledge regarding the harmfulness of their actions, their ability to act morally is constrained by an obscured epistemic vision. Privileged individuals who fail to meet the epistemic control condition ultimately morally damage themselves through their inability to regularly choose the right action and morally flourish.

However, the fact that unwitting privileged harm-doers fail to flourish morally is not to be pitied, particularly because privileged harm-doing often results in material benefits for the privileged as a result of the harm done to oppressed people. The fact that privileged individuals are epistemically damaged and hence cause harm does not eliminate the obligation to stop causing harm. Individuals who fail to fulfill their obligations should not be pitied for their inability to do so when their inability perpetuates the system from which they benefit on a daily basis.

However, within such a system, in which the privileged often do not realize their status, it is difficult to claim that the privileged individual meets the epistemic control condition for blameworthiness. Oppressive systems function like a veil. They distort reality and function such that individuals often look right at an issue and do not see it as it is. Rather, they experience a version of reality in which evidence for their own privilege is not seen as such. According to

Frye, the dominant conceptual scheme makes unintelligible, and erases, ways of life that threaten the maintenance of the overall oppressive system.<sup>26</sup> For instance, in the United States, there is a widespread mythology that upper class individuals earn their status and wealth through merit and hard work alone. This idea distorts the reality behind their situations; though merit and hard work contribute to personal success, the vast majority of individuals find themselves in a context that lends itself to their success. For instance, they may have been born into a wealthy family with the resources to fund their college tuition or have had access to knowledge regarding resources for gaining financial aid. Though the availability of such resources does not deny the importance of merit and hard work, focusing solely upon merit denies the context in which such success occurred: a context not available to many non-privileged individuals.

Evidence that contradicts privileged worldviews, such as the large amount of knowledge available from the civil rights movement, may not appear contradictory through the particular viewpoint provided by the veil. From this perspective, which is socialized from the youngest age within a powerful system dedicated to preventing knowledge of oppression, it is difficult to plausibly claim that privileged individuals are blameworthy for not knowing about their privilege. Because there is little privileged individuals could have done to prevent their ignorance within such a system, I claim that individuals for whom the veil is functioning at the time of action are not blameworthy for harm-doing that would not have occurred were they not privileged and concurrently epistemically limited regarding the harmful aspects of their privileged wrongdoing. Such individuals fail the epistemic requirement and cannot be expected to have known better.

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<sup>26</sup> Frye, Marilyn. "To See and Be Seen: The Politics of Reality." In *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1983).

However, while individuals who remain unaware of their privilege are not necessarily blameworthy, I believe there sometimes does exist a point at which the individual meets the epistemic condition in the transitive chain. While the veil exists and continues to distort the individual's perception of reality, the agent is blameless because s/he fails the epistemic condition. However, individuals often become aware of their privilege in stages, through glimpses around the veil. This may take the form of being told about particular privileges, studying privilege and injustice, or interacting with people who challenge social norms, among other things. For instance, we often learn about privilege through loving pressure from others regarding one aspect of diversity, such as gender. These glimpses gradually incorporate themselves into our conceptual frameworks. Often, the desire for consistency causes us to either reject or accept these glimpses; enough glimpses can result in the partial removal of a veil when they force the individual to confront them and become aware.

Evidence for the veil can be seen in the concepts of implicit bias, as well as microaggressions. According to Gendler, individuals who have an implicit awareness of the negative stereotypes of other groups, such as blacks, often exhibit "negative feelings and beliefs about [that group], which may be unconscious."<sup>27</sup> For instance, studies have suggested that employers who look at applications which have been randomly assigned stereotypically "white" and "black" names, more often reject the application with the black name than the white name, likely due to the cultural stereotype that black people are less desirable candidates than white

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<sup>27</sup> Gendler, Tamar. (2011). "On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias." Springer Science+Business Media B.V., 43.

people.<sup>28</sup> However, when asked, the employers were typically unaware that they had engaged in discriminatory behavior, often rationalizing their choices according to non-racial considerations.

The “veil” served to bias their behavior, such that they lacked an awareness regarding many of the real factors behind their actions and the social context that prompted their decisions to accept or reject the applications. These stereotypes and implicit biases often directly impact explicit behavior, even if the privileged individual lacks knowledge of their impact or endorses the beliefs as true. For instance, it may be the case that because I am aware of certain stereotypes about classes of people, such as the widespread belief that poor people are lazy, I will be more likely to bring these assumptions into my interactions with people in poverty. Although I do not endorse this belief and would consistently deny its truth, it and several other beliefs likely manifested themselves in my unreflective comment. My lack of explicit endorsement regarding the claim did not prevent me from acting in a way that perpetuated that belief, even if I did not mean to do so. Importantly, implicit bias involves living out a particular belief without intentionally doing so.

Further, the veil can obscure microaggressions, or the “little indignities” within an oppressive system that lack ill will or harmful intent, yet manifest themselves as reminders that a particular individual exists on the “downside” of oppression. Although microaggressions refer to the person aggressed, rather than the aggressor, many privileged people fail to see the indignities that non-privileged individuals endure on a daily basis as a result of the system that maintains and supports their privileged status. Quoted in Rolin, Benokraitis states that:

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<sup>28</sup> Bertrand, Marianne and Sendhil Mullainathan. “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination.” *American Economic Review* 94 (2004):991-1013.

“Each microinequity may seem so isolated and insignificant that one is tempted to ignore each instance of professional diminution. As these 'slights' snowball, however, they undermine one's self-confidence and self-respect. Thus, an accumulation of microaggressions can lower many faculty women's morale, feelings of self-worth, productivity, and intellectual contribution.”<sup>29</sup>

Microaggressions often fulfill the function of limiting the opportunities of non-privileged individuals. They occur in a variety of different situations and involve cultural norms that are not conceptualized by privileged individuals as harmful because they lack negative intent by any particular individual. Concepción elaborates upon the concept of microaggressions by describing two BMV's, both located in a particular town: one in the higher income end of town, and the other in the lower income end.<sup>30</sup> While the people employed in neither office harbor ill will toward any particular group of people, the BMV in the high income part of town is fully staffed, while the other is understaffed, resulting in longer wait times than can be accomplished during the typical hour-long lunch break. Therefore, individuals in the section of town with lower incomes often are forced to take off a half day of work to visit the BMV. When combined with a myriad of other similar microaggressions, a lowered paycheck and a perpetuation of the poverty cycle are the result.

Such “little” inequities accumulate on a daily basis to continually disadvantage non-privileged people over time without the presence of negative intent by any particular individual or group. By themselves, each individual instance could be overcome or put aside. However, their accumulation constitutes a “chilly climate” for non-privileged individuals. It is a climate built into the very system in which privileged individuals benefit, often without the knowledge

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<sup>29</sup> Rolin, Kristina. (2002). “Gender and Trust in Science.” *Hypatia*, Vol. 17.4., 109.

<sup>30</sup> Personal correspondence.

that they do so. Often, privileged individuals benefit from such inequities without acting in any particularly harmful way. For instance, going to the BMV is a relatively morally neutral act; yet, the availability of options is far higher for privileged individuals than it is for those who lack privilege. The veil hides this reality from privileged individuals, many of whom fail to see the non-privileged person as being aggressed.

Sometimes, an initial awareness of privilege with regard to one axis of diversity can render us more open to learning about other aspects of diversity and privilege. According to Erickson, theories of intersectionality must themselves be intersectional.<sup>31</sup> She claims that white privilege only exists in societies in which race exists as a concept. Those who understand white privilege may still lack understanding of the ethnic privilege in Bosnia, for instance, where race does not exist as a concept. Therefore, though we may know a great deal about certain types of privilege, it is often the case that other aspects of privilege remain veiled.

When individuals begin to catch glimpses of the reality behind their own privilege, they sometimes require many glimpses before becoming fully aware. However, some willfully put the veil back on and continue to exist as before, while others simply let it fall back down after it has been lifted a few times. I believe there eventually comes a point at which individuals are blameworthy for intentionally seeking to experience the more comfortable reality that benefits them and harms others. Further, such instances satisfy the epistemic condition in the chain of events, resulting in blameworthiness. Although those who put the veil back on experience reality in a way that keeps them from being aware of privilege, choosing to continue to exist within this reality is a failure in itself because the individual becomes blameworthy for not freeing her/himself from privileged ignorance when s/he knows s/he has ignorance that it is wrong to

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<sup>31</sup> Erickson, Jennifer. Personal correspondence.

have. If the individual becomes aware of the wrongness of her/his ignorance, s/he is blameworthy for continually seeking to experience that ignorance. I believe that continually seeking to experience reality in a particular way in the midst of a sufficient number of glimpses of one's privilege constitutes an obligation to know that satisfies the epistemic control condition for blameworthiness.

In response to the concept of the veil, critics might claim that although I have successfully described two ends of a continuum between blameworthiness and blamelessness, I have not answered when individuals are blameworthy despite only having a few or partial glimpses around the veil. If individuals have removed the veil entirely and still act out of privilege, they are blameworthy. Further, if the veil has never been lifted, they are blameless. However, my account has thus far not adequately explained how much partial knowledge, from intermittent or infrequent veil lifting, is sufficient for us to conclude that a privileged person is blameworthy for her/his harmful, self-benefiting acts that flow from and maintain an oppressive system. It is these partial knowledge cases, after all, that are so common in our culture. Specifically, thus far I have not drawn a conclusion about whether I was blameworthy or blameless for the class-privileged comment I described at the beginning of the paper.

I believe this demand for greater detail is justified, and I will attempt to provide it. Doing so is difficult due to the variability with which individuals experience the world and come to an awareness of their privileged status. However, I argue that individuals become blameworthy for their ignorance when they dogmatically refuse to examine the privilege with which they are presented. Such a refusal involves an awareness of the fact that they are ignorant, as well as lacking the desire to change that ignorance. This lack of desire may occur due to the convenience of maintaining a consistent worldview. Such awareness need not be the fully self-

reflective knowledge standard of traditional epistemology, but it must exist as a strong “inkling” within one’s awareness which one dogmatically prevents from becoming fully self-reflexive. For instance, imagine a privileged white man who lacks knowledge about both feminism and sexism. Further, this man received glimpses around the veil dozens of times throughout his lifetime and frequently in the recent past, yet consistently failed to free himself from that ignorance by confronting the wrongness of his privileged acts toward women. Because of his refusal, he maintains certain beliefs about women and feminists, such as the idea that all feminists hate men. His dogmatic beliefs persist as a denial of facts about feminism, whose existence he must be aware of to deny. His refusal does not constitute the end of the continuum: a complete lifting of the veil and a continuation of the harmful behavior in spite of the awareness of his privilege gained from lifting the veil. Rather, he maintains the veil through his lack of desire to rid himself of ignorance and hence obscures the knowledge that would result in a disruption of his consistent worldview. The veil remains in place because the man still holds certain ignorant beliefs while acting, rather than acting in spite of accurate knowledge about his privilege. In this instance, I argue that the man satisfies the epistemic control condition because he knows it is wrong to maintain ignorance, but does so anyway because doing so is more convenient. This argument is supported by Oshana, who claims that individuals are blameworthy insofar as they fail to assess their feelings about the harm in which they participate.<sup>32</sup> Because the man satisfies the epistemic control condition in his failure to assess his privilege, I believe he is transitively blameworthy for his later privileged acts.

In contrast, assume the same man also had a partial awareness of his ignorance through multiple and frequent glimpses through the veil, yet it simply did not occur to him to examine his

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<sup>32</sup> Oshana, 368.



actions in relation to those glimpses. His ignorance prevented him from understanding his role in contributing to the problem. In this instance, his ignorance, not his dogmatic failure to examine the relevant facts, prompted his lack of response. I argue that he does not meet the epistemic condition in this case due to the entrenched social norms outside of his control which prevented him from connecting his experience to the glimpses he received.

Critics might respond further that I am drawing the line here too leniently. While it is true that those who dogmatically refuse to assess their ignorance are blameworthy, this line results in very few privileged individuals being blameworthy for harmful privilege, even when they were presented with evidence regarding the wrongness of their acts at which any reasonable individual should have become fully and self-reflexively aware of her/his privilege. Therefore, the line should be drawn when an individual gains evidence at which a reasonable individual could be expected to lift the veil and examine the wrongness of her/his privilege.

However, I believe that this formulation wrongly denies the epistemic condition. By envisioning a “reasonable” person who would become aware of the act’s wrongness, the control condition disappears because if an actual person fails to measure up to that standard, s/he still is blameworthy despite her/his lack of awareness. Such a formulation of the blameworthiness line must fall back on the individual having a character which results in her/his lack of awareness regarding the act’s wrongness. Because I am unwilling to give up the consistent application of the epistemic control condition, my formulation results in many privileged individuals being blameless even when they have been presented with many glimpses around the veil. However, my formulation also results in a preservation of the epistemic control condition, which I have argued is necessary for a theory of blameworthiness that does not contradict common intuitions about blame.

## **Admonishment, Blaming, and Blameworthiness**

In response to the claim that privileged individuals are blameless for many of their harmful acts, many people might respond that privileged people still need to be held accountable for their actions. I agree. However, when I say that privileged individuals are not blameworthy, I do not mean to claim that they should not be admonished, blamed, or punished for harms that are influenced by their privilege. In fact, many people, privileged or not, who cause harm should be reprimanded for many of their actions. But my interest is in blameworthiness, not admonishment. Blameworthiness is a function of the agent, such that there exists some moral quality of the individual that is tainted or stained as a result of her/his actions. The blameworthy agent is either blameworthy or not; this fact exists independently of whether s/he is ever admonished or blamed.

In contrast, admonishment is an interpersonal interaction that addresses a harm, but does not necessarily refer to the agent's blameworthiness. The goal of admonishment is to avoid future harm, not to condemn the agent. For instance, a child may be admonished for attempting to run into the street even if s/he has done no wrong in doing so. The goal of admonishment, in this case, is to prevent the harm that might occur from allowing the child to run into the street. It addresses the behavior without making a claim about the child. I believe it is true that privileged people should at times be admonished when they cause harm or engage in behavior that risks the harming of others, even if there exists nothing about them by virtue of which they are worthy of blame for their actions. Because admonishing harm-doers can result in better consequences, it is often appropriate to do so even if the individual has committed no moral harm. Admonishment often calls attention to important issues and can function to end the behavior if the agent as a result of being admonished comes to see her/his actions as harmful. For instance, as a woman

living in a patriarchal society, I once found the courage to admonish a man who had made what I found to be an extremely sexist comment toward me. I informed him of how harmful his words had been, and to my surprise, the man immediately apologized and said he would refrain from making similar comments in the future. Admonishment successfully condemned his harmful behavior without making a statement regarding his personal blameworthiness for his harmful actions.

The concept of admonishment is further supported by Houston, who refers to admonishment as “quiet blame.” According to Houston, quiet blame provides us with the ability to protest on the part of others.<sup>33</sup> Quiet blame does not involve either condemnation or public censure of the agent, but rather condemnation of the action itself. It allows us to protest on behalf of others without negatively evaluating the agent her/himself. Further, the inability to be blamed or admonished suggests an inability to be held responsible for one’s actions.<sup>34</sup> To be a moral agent, according to this, is to be able to be held to a moral standard. Removing this quiet blame and refusing to condemn the act itself risks moral agency because it distances us from the moral community in which we are a part.

However, it is also the case that admonishing people for every instance of implicit bias and privilege can be unproductive and lead to resentment, as well as a “hardening” toward the issue of privilege. People who are repeatedly admonished for their “minor” harm-doing often become tired and sometimes even come to dismiss the problem of privilege as a series of minor events that have no real impact or harm. For instance, I have lately seen a series of online discussions centered around the claim that “Not everything is a feminist issue.” While such

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<sup>33</sup> Houston, Barbara, “In Praise of Blame,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Fall 1992), 132.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

claims often wrongly dismiss real instances of sexism and may even themselves be manifestations of privilege, they also serve to delegitimize feminism as a whole as a result of the widespread belief that feminism “takes issues” with things it should not. Because of this, it is sometimes better to “pick your battles” when admonishing and to seek a balance of condemning manifestations of privilege and seeking a climate in which the privileged do not come to dismiss the issue entirely. Sometimes, it is the case that too much pressure results in retrenchment. Other times, such “indignant hostilities” should be confronted.

I also do not mean to claim that blameless privileged individuals should never be punished for harmful behavior. Rather, there is often good reason to punish those who cause harm as a method of deterring future harmful behaviors and educating others about these harms. When punishment is justified on consequentialist grounds, blameworthiness is sometimes not necessary. For instance, the unstable criminal may fail to fulfill the relevant criteria for blameworthiness, but it may still be prudent to ensure the behavior stops through the usage of punishment. Therefore, punishment may be justified even for the blameless individual in certain circumstances, such as when doing so will result in the appropriate condemnation or termination of the behavior.

Further, I do not mean to claim that privileged individuals should never be blamed for their harmful acts. Rather, I think it is sometimes true that blaming can be justified even if the agent is not blameworthy. Similar to admonishment, blaming is an interpersonal interaction. Unlike admonishment, however, blaming necessarily involves a belief that the blamed individual is blameworthy and often includes negative feelings toward the blamee, such as anger or resentment. According to Sher, blame involves 1) the belief that a person has acted badly or is a

bad person and 2) a desire that the person not have acted badly or not have a current bad trait.<sup>35</sup> According to this conception, a person can be blameworthy regardless of whether anyone else actually levies blame, and a blameless person can be – albeit sometimes unjustifiably – blamed. While the blaming and blameworthiness often go together, they are conceptually different in an important way.

Although Sher feels that blame is only justly levied when the recipient of it is worthy of blame, I feel that this claim does not adequately acknowledge the power that blaming can provide the oppressed.<sup>36</sup> Often, oppressed individuals need to levy blame when they are harmed. Victims of oppression often need to levy blame as a form of self-defense and validation that they are not the type of beings against whom such harm is appropriate. Further, blaming provides the oppressed with the ability to direct the harm outward to its cause, rather than internalizing and experiencing their harm as self-caused. In such cases, the harm caused to the oppressed person who does not blame her/his oppressor may outweigh the harm done to the blameless person who is blamed. However, statements about the blameworthiness of privileged individuals do not deny this need. It is reasonable for victims of privileged harm-doers to hold negative feelings toward and blame those who caused them harm, even if the harm-doer is blameless.

Finally, I do not mean to claim that we should condone the harmful behaviors of blameless privileged individuals towards non-privileged individuals. It is true that blameless privileged wrongdoers often cause a great deal of harm to the oppressed. However, the claim that privileged individuals are blameless for the harm they cause does not justify or condone this

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<sup>35</sup> Sher, George. *In Praise of Blame*. (Oxford, 2006). 114.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

harm. While privileged individuals are not morally stained or tainted for causing harm, there still exists an obligation to not cause harm. Privileged people have an obligation to cause less harm and change their behaviors, especially as they are made aware of them. It is perfectly consistent to claim that an individual caused harm as a result of her/his privileged actions without making the claim that s/he is blameworthy for this harm. If the harm itself fails to connect back to her/him as an individual in a meaningful way, s/he may be blameless even if s/he commits a moral failure.

Because the blamelessness of many privileged individuals does not imply that harm-doers should not be admonished, punished, or blamed, that they are often blameless should not be as difficult to accept. Blameless individuals should still be held accountable for the harms they cause, and it is even appropriate at times for the oppressed to blame them when doing so serves a self-defensive purpose. However, in response to the claim that privileged individuals are often not blameworthy, it is important to consider how the privileged should respond.

### **Disavowing Privilege**

Although privileged individuals are not blameworthy when they lack awareness regarding their privilege, the question is how they should respond to their blamelessness. In answer to this question, I believe that while I should not feel guilty for my class-privileged comment, I am still accountable for my actions that cause harm. In response, I should act to disrupt the privilege I have been handed by an oppressive system. Consider Frye, who claims that people are taught to view their racial membership as an inescapable fact.<sup>37</sup> Such individuals have been handed privilege from birth and often experience their privilege as a fact about life.

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<sup>37</sup> Frye, 233.

However, privileged individuals who gain an awareness of their privilege may be able to refuse to enact this category and “align [their] will with the forces that will eventually dissolve or dismantle that race as such.”<sup>38</sup> Applying this to other privileges suggests that individuals can refuse to enact their own privilege by attempting to undermine it. For instance, as a white, upper-middle class woman, I can become aware of my privilege and refuse to accept much of the privilege that comes with membership in those areas of privilege. Frye suggests that refusing to accept privilege can be accomplished through 1) being alert in environments in which privilege is rewarded, 2) “practic[ing] new ways of being in environments,” and 3) not encouraging privilege in other privileged individuals.<sup>39</sup> Such refusals to enact privilege are far from easy because the privileged are frequently handed privilege on a daily basis even when they try to refuse them. However, continually refusing to accept certain privileges can have the positive impact of contributing to the dismantling of privilege.

According to Frye, such dismantling of one’s privilege can have the problematic consequence of serving as an act of “self-loathing,” rather than one of liberation.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, my initial response to my privileged comment was guilt and self-directed anger. I understood my privilege and felt the desire to disassociate from the self that had made that comment. This is clearly an undesirable consequence, especially considering the blameless nature of many privileged individuals who cause harm. Inappropriate self-directed blame can cause individuals to unjustly brutalize themselves because they feel they deserve it.<sup>41</sup> However, I believe my

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 226.

<sup>41</sup> Concepción, David. Overcoming Oppressive Self-Blame: Gray Agency in Underground Railroads. *Hypatia*. Vol. 24, no. 1 (Winter, 2009). 95.

discussion of privileged blamelessness can serve as a liberatory response to that feeling while also acknowledging my accountability to respond to the problem.

Rather than continuing to experience negative self-blame, I should seek to become a less epistemically damaged individual by becoming more aware of aspects of my privilege of which I previously lacked awareness. Doing so will allow me to morally flourish by gaining the types of knowledge that will help me to more regularly do right. If I maintain lots of veils which impair my ability to see correctly, and by not seeing I am causing more harm than I would prefer to cause, I have an epistemic limitation that is resulting in an inability to act according to my moral obligations. Therefore, insofar as privileged individuals want to morally excel, they should seek to free themselves from the veils that prevent them from meeting the epistemic control condition and realizing the harmfulness of their actions.

Further, once privileged individuals are freed from self-blame and begin to undermine their own privilege, a larger justice-seeking agenda can be addressed. If the privileged cannot see structural injustices, they cannot begin to overcome them. One consequence of my initial guilt and self-blame was that I felt so bad for messing up that I could not even continue the conversation and address my privilege. However, if we lack the ability to engage with others and talk about how privilege plays out in our culture, we cannot achieve the dialogue necessary for change. Because privileged people are constrained by epistemic conditions that are not often met, limiting where blame appears in conversations about privilege allows people to go into these spaces without an accusatory stance and make progress.

Sacrificing privilege, therefore, has the impact of working toward the elimination of the logic of domination, an oppressive conceptual framework which posits the moral superiority of



humans or groups of humans and claims that this superiority justifies the subordination of inferior groups by humans.<sup>42</sup> While differences among individuals will remain, we can rid ourselves of that logic which accompanies value dualism, disjunctive pairs seen as both oppositional and exclusive.<sup>43</sup> While the typical response to injustice is to incite outrage to get the privileged people to stop their harmful actions, I believe that privileged individuals should stop feeling blameworthy. Instead, they should focus on what they are doing and change. Now that I know I am not blameworthy for my action since I did the wrong thing unknowingly, I need to move on and target change.

Overall, individuals are not blameworthy for their harmful privileged acts if they fail to satisfy the epistemic control condition at any point in a chain of events leading to their lack of awareness. Such acts should still be considered harms, but the individual cannot be blameworthy if s/he should not have known about the wrongness of her/his actions. Because a function of oppressive systems is to prevent this knowledge to benefit the privileged, those who lack awareness of their privilege experience reality through a veil that renders them blameless for their privileged harm doing. However, when individuals dogmatically refuse to address their ignorance, they are blameworthy for their acts. Those who become aware of their privilege and its accompanying harm should relieve themselves of guilt and instead focus upon undermining their own privilege in the interest of justice.

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<sup>42</sup> Warren, Karen. (1990). In *The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book* (3rd Ed.) (Wadsworth, 2003). 284.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 283.

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